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City given bad news about underground water

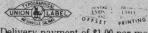
The Santa Cruz City Water Commission heard Monday what Soquel Creek County District directors were told last month — the underground basin that supplies water for all of the midcounty area and a portion of the city of Santa Cruz is rapidly approaching its limits to support new growth in the area.

Geologist Ken Muir of the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park told the city water commissioners that he is now writing a report showing that local water purveyors will be able to pump less than half of the water they originally thought from the Purisma sand formation that flows under the midcounty

Green Sheet

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before salt water intrusion contaminates the fresh water supplies for the populace.

Muir said Monday that his best guess at present of the "safe annual yield" is now 5,000 to 6,000 acre feet from the area. The Soquel Creek County Water District is now pumping 3,500 acre feet a

Initially, local water officials believed the aquifier could supply 10,000 acre feet a year to the basin.

Muir said salt water intrusion has been detected in shallow wells drilled around the New Brighton Beach area and at one well in the Opal Cliffs area operated by the Soquel Creek County Water District.

"The yield is half of what it had been calculated in the past," Muri said, "about half of the 10,000 acre feet.'

The danger is not running out of water, said Muri, but in reducing the pressure in the artesian system and allowing seawater to creep into the coastal area, contaminating the fresh water wells.

'Seawater is moving shoreward from Monterey Bay but we don't know where the interface is," Muir added.

"The wells that show increases in chloride (salt) are perforated from sea level to minus 100 feet," Muir said.

Those wells are the Soquel

Creek District well in Opal Cliffs and the private wells in the New Brighton Beach area, Muir indicated.

The remainder of the Soquel Creek District wells and the Santa Cruz city wells in the old Beltz water system in Live Oak draw from much deeper stata in the Purisma formation, an area that produces more water for the mercial users than the shallow private wells.

Muir was questioned by water commissioners on the effects of drought and wet years in determining the amounts of water that can be drawn off safely.

Noting that the area is now in the midst of a prolonged dry spell, Muir said, "If we had a series of wet years, the system could recover. But if it doesn't come soon enough, damage will be done and it is very difficult to flush out salt water."

The system works on pressure, nto volume of water, Muir said. Water that is absorbed into the aquifer in the Santa Cruz mountains moves perhaps 45-50 feet a year through the sand stata. But the pressure from a very wet year can be seen in two or three months time as water levels in wells rebound.

Santa Cruz city water director Morris Allen argued that the USGS figures were influenced by the very dry years ist experienced in cruz County.

"Not really," said Muir. "The water levels didn't seem influenced too highly by

ought." Commissioners took no ction on Muir's report. The geologist indicated it will be several months before a final report is issued by the service on the area's water problems, but added that a draft report will be reviewed by the Soquel District prior to a general release of the report.

